

## In the Skin

*Finalist for the 2016 Fiction Prize*

Dahlia reclines on her bed during her regularly scheduled break, inspecting her hair for split ends. She finds one; her lips tuck in concentration as she tears the hair in two. She lets the long string of cells loose, glowing like fool's gold as it bobs and arcs its way to the carpeting. Behind her is a parting in the clouds, just the right angle, a rare dose of sunlight amid the clustered towers of downtown San Francisco. It lights the floor-to-ceiling windows on fire, Dahlia too, her skin aglow, lips shimmering with the gloss she applies religiously. Sometimes she balances the round silver canister on my head and I stay very still. It is not hard to balance things.

Dahlia rolls to her side and gives me a wide lopsided smile. "Tell me the story again."

I inch closer to her bed, close enough that I could reach out, stroke her hair. But I do not, I will never, not without invitation. "What if Mother hears?"

"Please, Lilac. I'm so bored," Dahlia groans. I do not blame her. She has not attended group night on the 143rd floor for several months now, and it has been two years and seventeen days since she went outside. And me? I have never been past this door, never gone outside Dahlia's room—it is Mother's dictum.

I call up the memories, feel them supercharge my system, and begin the telling.

♦ ♦ ♦

Nikki and I sat cross-legged in the quad enjoying our sack lunches. We were close enough to the huddle of girls who knew everything that I could hear them, or nearly so—I had to study their mouths to understand. They were talking about a boy, his penis actually, and the one with red hair had her hands out like bookends, demonstrating its length. She had pink skin, a mole like a lost button peaking out from her oxford, open to her bra-line, a uniform infraction worthy of detention.

The girls used words I knew in other contexts like *cock* and *rod*, coloring them with new meaning, and I sunk my teeth into my turkey sandwich, storing away the information.

♦ ♦ ♦

Dahlia laughs, clutching her pillow, rolling side to side. It is funny to her, this talk of penises. She is an adolescent so, of course, it is natural. But I do not find it funny. I can laugh. It is not hard to let out a barking sound. I do this now, bark with Dahlia, until she is ready for me to continue.



Red explained an encounter with a senior, so tall he was too tall, deceptively heavy, the girls debating the benefits and disadvantages of being on top. I listened, not daring to chew, until the blonde with the orange rub-on tan locked eyes with me.

“We’ve got an audience,” she said and Red glared at me, running her finger around that mole, an unpleasing habit.

I swallowed, cough-choking a bite down, as the girls who knew everything went away flipping hair and huffing.



“Mother’s coming,” Dahlia hisses, but already I am zipping into my closet. Dahlia pretends to sleep as Mother stands on the other side of the door, the twin shadows of her feet darkening the cream carpeting. I turn my gaze to the window decorated with purple butterflies, the metal and glass glare of the towers beyond. Hovering in the clouds is a lone hawk, Red Tail if my feed is accurate.

Mother stalks back down the hallway and Dahlia whispers, “Go on.”



Nikki slouched across from me, cringing down a sip from her thermos.

“What are you drinking?”

“Herbal tea. We have Social Sciences next period. Mr. DeSoto is the only teacher who will let me sleep.”

“Sleep? Why do you need to sleep?” Nikki and I did not have separate lives. If one of us was up late, the other one was on the phone hearing about it.

“I’ve been having these dreams. Like I’m someone else. An old woman with wrinkles and a husband.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “We have sex together. I do things in my dreams I never knew existed.”

“That’s disgusting.”

Nikki bit the tip off a baby carrot. “It doesn’t feel disgusting. It feels real. That’s why I believe in reincarnation. I’m certain I lived that life. That woman is me.”

“Well, you can’t do that in class,” I said too loudly.

Her eyes darted about, her voice hushed. “No one will know.”

“I’ll know.”

“So?”

“So, I don’t need that mental picture.”

“You couldn’t picture it if you tried.” She gagged down the rest of her tea and gathered her things. I wanted to stop her, to tell her I was sorry—she was my best friend, my only friend—but I could not find the words. I can say them now, over and over. I am sorry. I do not know why it was so hard then.



“You should’ve asked for details.” Dahlia pouts from her treadmill. It is time for Exercise and she must stay on routine. She huffs up a steep incline, pumping her pudgy arms, hair tied in a messy knot at the top of her head. “It would make for a better story.”

“You are right,” I tell her. “Should I continue?”

She is always interrupting. It is her habit, telling me how to tell my story. I do not discourage her. It is better for us both if I learn to tell it the way she wants; only it is always changing, what she wants from me. I am not particularly advanced though I try, playing up the parts she likes, skipping over the boring details. When I should be dozing, I steal off on my feed for her, to learn new words, new ways of saying what I mean. But in my head, the story never changes; they play for me, memory after memory, every word, every smell, every last itch.



Red glared at me from her desk near the back. I tried not to make eye contact as I slipped into my seat, mercifully buffered by Belinda McCormick’s perky ponytail. Nikki had rested her head on the desk in front of me though I could tell by her tense shoulders she was awake.

Mr. DeSoto was writing out our roles in the upcoming mock trial of Harry Truman. I saw my name in the list of jurors, determining whether the President had committed a war crime when he bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was ancient history, some fifty years earlier, but Mr. DeSoto could not be convinced to pick something more culturally relevant.

Nikki was asleep now. Her face had sagged into her forearm, a sliver of drool zigzagging her chin. I twiddled my pencil, chewed on its end in a way that suggested I was somewhere else entirely, only it was Nikki who was traveling.

The kids around her laughed when they saw her sleeping. Red zipped a paper airplane over Nikki’s desk. Mr. DeSoto kept on writing. Of course Red was given a big part. She would play the defendant’s attorney.

She sneered at the board, her eyes meeting mine as I dared to register her reaction.

“Mr. DeSoto? Will I be able to vet my jurors?”

Mr. DeSoto paused at the board, sighed, and went back to writing.

“Sorry, you’re stuck with me,” I told Red.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. And I won’t be bullied into changing my vote.”

“I will kick your ass.”

“You will have to make a good case.”

She opened her mouth to insult me, but Mr. DeSoto was writing Nikki’s name now, her part, Harry Truman. Red snorted. “Give me someone I can work with, Mr. DeSoto!”

He turned, squinting as if into a spotlight. Then he noticed Nikki asleep. He balled up his list, slammed it into the trashcan and shouted, “Wake up!”

The whole class shrank away from him, like trees bending in a bomb test, as Nikki raised her head, wiped the drool from her chin.

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“I would hate that,” Dahlia says from the shower, the bathroom steamy, the mirror mercifully fogged—I do not enjoy the sight of myself. My body is not so much mine as a thing I am in. “Sitting in a classroom with all those kids. How embarrassing!”

“It was embarrassing. Many times we were embarrassed.”

“Mother says it builds character. Do you believe that?”

“I do not know.”

“Oh, come on, Lilac. Use your imagination.”

I want to tell her I am trying but it comes out like a hiccup as it always does when she asks for instant answers to questions that require processing. “I do not know.”

“Forget it. Will you go on?”

“Yes, of course.” I omit my usual request for advancement. There is no question it would make me a better companion, but Dahlia is tired of my asking, and it is not her fault. There is no convincing Mother, who does not like me, who has many voices. She is in sales, for a chemical company, some magical solvent. Sometimes I hear her making her screen pitches through the door. For the first few weeks I thought there was someone else living in the apartment, another woman, pleasant and laughing. I would hear the smiling sound of her voice as she made her sales calls and wonder who this woman was who glowered at me, who barked.

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We shuffled out the school's doors into a bleak afternoon, misty with marine layer. Everyone thinks Laguna Beach is all sunshine and beaches, but I remember it as gray.

"I feel so free!" Nikki gushed, linking her arm in mine. I had never seen her like that. If she was going crazy, her paranoid parents were not going to be much help. They were skeptical of modern medicine and anti-vaccination, which is why Nikki came down with the shingles in eighth grade and how she became my friend. She was pretty enough to sit higher in the high school hierarchy, but weird, with strange ideas about science and medicine. Once, she even argued with me about becoming an organ donor on my driver's license.

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"You're getting off track." Dahlia wipes a circle of mirror clean and examines her face from various angles, trying on various pouts. "Can you please just stick to the story?"

I apologize, ask her if she would like me to brush her hair as I recount.

"No thanks." She touches the spot at the base of her head where the hair is starting to come back in. I think she meant it as a joke, asking me to braid her hair, but it got caught in my joints. Some of the hairs are still there. Dahlia cannot get them out, not even with tweezers. "Just the story," she yawns and I know I must get to the exciting part soon.

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Nikki dug her head into my neck as we broke free of the crowd, hustling down the sidewalk. "He made me paella."

"And?"

"And, what?" She wanted me to ask, to admit I was interested, but I would never and she knew it. Of course I did not have to—she wanted to tell me. "We did it in the kitchen."

"Can you be more specific?"

"I cannot. What happens between a husband and wife is private."

"Ha."

"I'm not going to argue with you about my faith."

"Your faith?"

"Reincarnation is a central tenet of the Hindu religion." She stabbed a bony elbow into my side, and I winced away from her. She had incredible reach with a jab and a long gait that got the cross-country instructor interested though Nikki had asthma.

"You're Truman, you know."

"What?"

"In the mock trial."

“No.”

“And Red’s your lawyer.”

“Why do you pretend you don’t know their names?”

“Who said I’m pretending?”

She threw an arm over my shoulder and I clasped her waist and we were walking together down the uneven sidewalk, trees shaking leaves loose, lodging in our hair, crunching underfoot, and I felt it, how free she was, how it caught on me, carrying me with her.

“I want to meet someone,” Nikki said, “I want to feel it in my own skin.”

“You mean sex?”

She gave me a savage roll of the eyes. “Why not? I’m not a virgin anymore.”

“Isn’t that cheating?”

“In my dreams I’m her and me at the same time. Here, I don’t know. I haven’t figured it all out yet. But I think he wants me to be happy. Who knows? Maybe I’ll even find him in a hot new body.”

I was not sure what to say to that. She sounded so earnest, as if she really believed it. But what was even more irrational was that I believed it too. I could feel it, the wanting. That was all I knew of faith.

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“That’s enough.” It is Mother and she is frowning at me, arms crossed, long nails decorated with a colorful flurry of dots, tap-tapping on her forearm. How long has she been listening? And why did I not notice?

Dahlia is equally alarmed. I can tell by the lie she delivers. “We were just talking about the differences between our schools. Did you really go with all your friends? That’s fascinating, Lilac.”

“Sure you were. Should I turn it off or are you going to?”

“Time for bed.” Dahlia pats me on the head. I do not feel it exactly but my system registers the touch’s vibrations. That is something like feeling.

“It is only 7:14,” I offer. “According to my clock, we still have eleven minutes.”

Mother stomps over to me. “You little—” She reaches around to my back and darkness falls.

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I awake fully charged, Dahlia smiling into my face. “Hi,” she says, munching on a brown breakfast bar that looks like excrement.

I know exactly where I left off but she does not ask me to continue. When I pause mid-story I cannot stop thinking about the moment where